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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to improve on the shortcomings of a much publicized previous study (Morris, 1988) which examined the effects of parenting at an older age and concluded that children of older parents had a generally unfavorable view of late parenting and would not choose it for themselves. For the new study, data was gathered from college students (N=415) who were born to parents who ranged in age from their teens to their fifth decade of life. Two identical Affective Quality of Parenting Scales (father, mother) were derived from fixed response questionnaire items designed to tap the major issues raised by Morris. Results indicated that Morris was substantially in error. For mothers there was no significant relationship between maternal age and maternal affective quality of parenting. For fathers, a significant bell shaped curvilinear relationship emerged. Fathers in their 30s were perceived as yielding a higher affective quality of parenting than both younger and older fathers while younger and older fathers were perceived at similar levels. Children did not believe that they received a lower affective quality of parenting at the hands of older parents than they received at the hands of younger parents. The media attention given to Morris' work is misleading and perhaps damaging to older parents, to prospective older parents, and to prospective older adoptive parents. This negative media image of older parents created, or reinforced, by Morris requires correction. (ABL)

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PARENTAL AGE AND PARENTING QUALITY AS PERCEIVED BY LATE ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Do children of older parents perceive a preponderance of disadvantages to older parenting as concluded by Morris (1988)? Subjects are 415 late adolescents whose fathers ranged in age from 16 to 55 and mothers from 13 to 41 at their birth. Two identical Affective Quality of Parenting Scales (father, mother) were derived from fixed response questionnaire items designed to tap the major issues raised by Morris. Results indicate that Morris (1988) substantially is in error. For mothers, there is no significant relationship between maternal age and maternal affective quality of parenting. For fathers, a significant bell shaped curvilinear relationship emerges. Fathers in their 30's are perceived as yielding a higher affective quality of parenting than both younger and older fathers while younger and older fathers are perceived at similar levels.

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Introduction

Much of the early work on parental age (e.g. Daniels & Weingarten, (1982) Sooner or Later: The Timing of Parenthood in Adult Lives) involved in-depth interviews with parents of different ages. While noting both advantages and disadvantages of parenting at different stages of the adult life-cycle, the authors of these studies tended to emphasize the advantages of being an older parent. The book which led to the present study, however, was designed to "correct" these parent point-of-view studies by looking at things from the point-of-view of the child. The author was Monica Morris who received extensive media attention. She appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show (Summer, 1988), reports of her book were carried on the wire-services, and a page of TIME magazine was devoted to her (10/10/88). The title of her book, Last-Chance Children: Growing Up with Older Parents, gives away her central theme:

"The 'testimony' of the late-born children in this study does not demonstrate overwhelming advocacy of late-parenting (over age 35). From the children's standpoint ... the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Most would not choose older parenting for themselves or recommend it for others and many voiced strong objections to the trend" (Morris, 1988, p. 128).

We came to suspect that her conclusions substantially are in error, in part because of four methodological shortcomings: (1) while she did interview 22 children of older parents, she failed to interview children of younger parents; (2) the interviews were highly unsystematic; (3) her "snowball" subject selection technique creates doubt about sample representativeness; and (4) since the interviews focused on parental age, age stereotypes as well as parental evaluations may have been elicited. In addition, her findings are inconsistent with studies of parental age from the parent's point-of-view (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982; Nydegger, 1981; Parke, 1988).

Method

To improve upon the shortcomings of Morris's design, the present study: (1) gathered data from children who were born to parents who ranged in age from their teens through their fifth decade of life; (2) gathered data on more than 22 subjects; (3) used a more systematic data gathering technique -- a questionnaire; (4) sought a more representative sample -- mostly freshman and sophomores in required English Composition courses; and (5) subjects were unaware that parental age was a variable of interest until the very end of the questionnaire, thus presumably eliciting parental ratings unconfounded by age sterotypes.

The subjects were 415 undergraduates from diverse majors and ethnic groups. They ranged in age from 16 to 41 with a mean of

19.5 years. At the birth of the students, their fathers ranged in age from 16 to 55 with a mean of 30 years and their mothers ranged from 13 to 41 with a mean of 26 years.

The procedure was to administer an anonymous questionnaire in class. To test the content of Morris's conclusions, 26 fixed-response items were created to tap the major themes of her book. There were 13 identically worded items for mother and father.

Results and Discussion

Factor analysis of the 26 items yielded two major scales with 8 identical items each for mother and father. The scales were labeled Mother Affective Quality of Parenting (alpha = .88) and Father Affective Quality of Parenting (alpha = .90).

The 8 items were as follows. Overall, how would you RATE your parents? How much do you think that your parents ENJOYED being parents? When you needed your parents' SUPPORT, were they there for you? Did your parents have enough ENERGY to meet your needs? Did you feel that you could CONFIDE IN your parents? Were your parents available to spend TIME with you in activities? How emotionally CLOSE were you to your parents? And, when you were an ADOLESCENT, how well did you get along with your parents?

Table 1 presents the results for how children view the affective quality of parenting they received -- organized according to the age of their parents at their birth. The ratings of the parent could range from 1 to 5, with 5 representing the highest affective quality of parenting.

In viewing Table 1, recall, that for Morris's conclusions to be supported, older parents (those over 35) must receive significantly lower ratings than all younger parents. Clearly, the results show no such relationship. Instead, for children's perceptions of their mothers (top row), there is no significant relationship between maternal age and maternal affective quality of parenting. For fathers (bottom row), a significant relationship with age does emerge. However, the relationship is bell-shaped curvilinear rather than downwardly linear.

Thus, contrary to the assertions of Morris, there is no evidence to suggest that children of older mothers perceive that they have suffered a lower affective quality of parenting than children of younger mothers. The data do suggest, however, that there may be an optimal age for fathering children, namely between 30 and 39 years of age. Fathers in their 30's are perceived more positively than both younger ($t = 2.3$, $df = 348$, $p < .05$) and older ($t = 2.3$, $df = 37$, $p < .05$) fathers. Fathers over 45 are rated at about the same level as teenage fathers and fathers between 40 and 44 are rated at about the same level as fathers in their 20's. Critically, the cutoff used by Morris for "older" parents (above age 35) includes fathers (age 35-39) who receive the highest

ratings in the present study for the a ctive quality of their parenting.

Conclusions

In conclusion, children do not believe that they receive a lower affective quality of parenting at the hands of older parents than they receive at the hands of all younger parents. It is unfortunate that Morris (1988) substantially is in error. The media attention given to her work is misleading and perhaps damaging to older parents, to prospective older parents, and to prospective older adoptive parents (Mech, 1973). The negative media image of older parents created, or reinforced, by Morris requires correction.

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Table 1

Perceived Affective Quality of Parenting by Age of Parent at the Child's Birth

	Age of Parent							
Parent	13-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-55	F
Mother	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.3	----	0.86
(N)	(32)	(142)	(124)	(76)	(27)	(5)		
Father	3.4	3.8	3.8	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.2	2.23*
(N)	(6)	(75)	(115)	(107)	(53)	(19)	(12)	

Note. Scale Range = 1-5; high score = High Affective Quality of Parenting.
*P < .05